



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Somewhere along the line in my shaping and formation to be a preacher, someone said something to me that stuck with me. The person said, sermons should be like pearls of a great price in that they find their origin in what irritates rather than what satiates. Of course, this wonderful simile points to that real-life phenomenon of what happens and how pearls are created in oysters and in mussels. The beginning of a creation of a pearl is actually an invasion into the fragile ecosystem of these mollusks. A parasite enters into the interior of an oyster and the oyster's immune response is to encase the little buggger with loads and loads of secretions that become hard and shiny and luminescent. And in that process, the threat is contained and something that is meant to bother becomes a thing of beauty that is treasured.

I thus admit being mildly annoyed with the parable of the ten bridesmaids. It's a seemingly straightforward, almost painfully obvious parable. Ten women are getting ready for a wedding and five bring extra oil for the lamps and five do not. Things don't go as planned and when the party finally starts, all the women run out of oil in their lamps, but only five have enough to continue. The other five, well, they got to go to Walmart. And by the time that they return, they're locked out of the wedding and they miss out. So the moral of the story? Keep awake because you never know when the bridegroom is coming.

It's the same thing that Jesus actually tells the disciples, the apostles to do when He goes to Gethsemane to pray to be saved from the torture that He's about to undergo with the Cross. He says to them, keep awake. But when He returns, He discovers the disciples can't do it. And it seems to be part of our human makeup, the way we handle delays and waiting. Today, you and I, we would pass time by endlessly scrolling on our phones. But before phones, how did they pass time waiting? They closed their eyes and took a nap. Is that so terrible that we need to be admonished by Jesus?

When things don't go as they were planned, to me, it seems like really bad advice to say to us, keep the adrenaline going, keep the anxiety up, don't stop planning, remain vigilant, because you never know when it's going to happen. I remember reading that this is why always being anxious and afraid and concerned about your future is so bad for you. Not just spiritually and emotionally, but physically. Because if you're always worried, if you're always

concerned about what may happen, if you're constantly in this state of anxiety and stress, your body actually keeps your physiological response of readiness through the activation of your sympathetic nervous system. And that's the thing that produces things like adrenaline and cortisol. And that's what gives you the energy to go forth and fight and try to figure out what to do in times of stress.

But over time, that experience of constant vigilance, of constantly being alert, of constantly being stressed out, that's constantly pumping that adrenaline and cortisol through your veins and it actually becomes very harmful for your body. You will develop a hardening of your blood vessels. Your blood pressure rises, you can't sleep. And even more damaging problems can happen to you, like heart attacks and strokes. Our bodies were not made to be in a heightened state of vigilance. Rather, we were made to be our healthiest when we're not under stress, but rather, we feel safe and secure and hopeful. And this is what I believe, that the Son of Man did not come to this earth in order to bring us more terror or stress. This is the God who walks with us in the valley of the shadow of death. That's what the psalmist says in that famous psalm, Psalm 23. And what does He give us? He gives us His rod, His staff, His power. Why? To comfort us and protect us.

So what is it that Jesus really wants us to know? Is it to tell us you need to remain vigilant because He can show up at any time? Or do we have to remember that this is the parable of the ten bridesmaids? This is not a fable. This is not a story with a moral, like the tortoise and the hare, right? We all know what the moral is of that story. Slow and steady wins the race. It never changes. That is the outcome of that tale. But a parable defies the ease of an easy interpretation.

In our psalm today, the psalmist in Psalm 78 tells us what God intends with parables. The Lord says, I will open my mouth in a parable. I will declare the mysteries of ancient times. Parables are mysteries to be uncovered. They are pearls created out of something that is not quite right and it's meant to cause you to wonder about the layers. Parables are hardly ever straightforward. And for that, I am eternally grateful.

So can we please revisit the story of these 10 women again and perhaps see what Jesus may be teaching us in this parable? Because there is one thing that I know, the God who took on flesh and lived among us knows what happens when a bunch of bridesmaids are preparing for a wedding. There is at least one bridesmaid who is prepared for anything that can happen that day, and this woman comes equipped with a big bag. And in this bag is the sewing kit, the Advil, the safety pins, the makeup remover, and the double sided tape. And here's the most important part. This bag, it is not just for herself, because she is waiting for that other bridesmaid to say, hey, does anyone have any hairspray and she's got a pull it out of her bag because it's all there.

And Jesus, Jesus wants us to ask, who are the wise bridesmaids and who are the foolish ones? Because if those bridesmaids were indeed wise, they'd have enough oil to go around from everybody and then they'd bring snacks. And they certainly would have never refused to share what they had with their fellow sisters because we are all wise enough to know that the party is never as fun as when all of your friends can be there. And those foolish bridesmaids, they knew that as well, which made them actually the wise ones because they're incredulity that the women who had extra did not share so that they all could be together, that's the actual punchline of the parable, because bridesmaids know that the fun is being together.

Whenever I'm presiding over a wedding here, we put the bride and the bridal party in the library. It's nice, it's got a mirror and everything. Then we stuff the groom and the groomsmen in this little tiny vesting room in the back. And we keep them separate in case they don't have a first look, which is they see each other before the wedding. So if they don't want to see each other before the wedding, we separate them. And I like to go visit them before the wedding to see what's going on. And I'll go into the room with the groom and the groomsmen and they're all usually sitting around looking really bored and passing time scrolling with their phones, because they can't drink because we're astute and we don't let them drink before the wedding.

But in the room with the bridesmaids, there's a flurry of activity. There's this crazy preparation and primping. There's adjusting of the strapless dresses, the laughter, the gossip of who did what to whom, and the assurance that every woman there is at their absolute most beautiful that they've ever been. And Jesus knows this is how human life is. So, the idea that those five women would be okay that the other five could not continue to the wedding without them is preposterous. Wise bridesmaids, they figure out, they figure out how to pivot because what's most important is not that they get into the party. What is most important is that we all get in, and sometimes that requires creativity, sacrifice, sharing and sheer will.

I was struck by this as I saw the photo that appears on your bulletin cover. There were a series of photos coming out of Gaza as the electricity got cut off and people couldn't stay in their homes. And in these photos, people gathered around outlet power strips, like the thirsty would gather around wells with fresh water. And one of these photos was of a shopkeeper who hooked up strips from inside his shop and put them outside his business so anyone could use them. And as you can well imagine, in the midst of such chaos as what's happening over there, your phone becomes a lifesaver for you. It's the only way that you could know what's happening as everything else shuts down.

Can you imagine if those who had electricity in Gaza acted like those wise bridesmaids and refused to share? Is that what Jesus wants? Not a chance. Because God shows mercy to all, the empowered and the powerless, literally by providing outlet strips. In the end, the decision that you and I are called to make is not whether we're going to be on a high state of alert to be ready and prepared for Jesus to return. The decision that you and I are called to make is how we want to live when we have no idea when the bridegroom is coming. We can't always figure out what's going to happen tomorrow. But there are those of us who were made to have big bags and power outlet strips, and those of us who are made to trust that our friends will have what we need when we need it.

And for me, that is far holier than living in a state of anxiety and fear, thinking that if you don't get it right, you are doomed to being left out of the party forever. Jesus Christ did not die at the hands of sinners so that He could prevent the unprepared from getting into the feast. I mean, come on now. The ancient mystery that Jesus wants us to ponder is, does your preparedness have anything to do with God's mercy and care for you? The disciples, they clearly were not prepared for Jesus. They fell asleep. And yet, after Jesus was raised from the dead, He invited them to the banquet feast. What makes you think you need to be any better than they are?

Let me finish by tying this all into our wonderful season of stewardship by saying, the same mystery that shapes our parable can shape your giving. So don't be fooled. Don't be fooled if I say something like this to you, that giving to Christ Church Cranbrook is like 10 parishioners, five who are wise and five who are foolish. And the wise, well, they kept their funds safe in interest producing financial vehicles and only gave a portion so that they could be prepared for an unforeseen future.

And the five foolish parishioners, well, they gave generously because they had no guarantee of tomorrow and wanted to make today better than yesterday rather than bank on an uncertain future. And so it would be so easy for me to say here, to you, go ahead, be like those foolish parishioners and give today rather than wait for tomorrow. But I love you all too much to do that to you.

So here's what I will say. Please never give because you think you need to. You don't. God does not need you to prove that you are faithful so that you can get into the wedding banquet. Please only give because you want to. You will be far more generous when you do that. You'll be just like that bridesmaid with a big bag or that shopkeeper with those outlet strips. Or you'll be just like the Son of Man who decided to come down on earth and take on flesh and die for the whole entire world. And that, my friends, is a pearl that is priceless. And for God's sake, do not be afraid to nap.

Amen.

